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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000437

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SUBJECT: IRI NATIONAL VOTER SURVEY: NEW PUBLIC OPTIMISM

REF: 07 TBILISI 2423

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The latest USAID-funded International Republican Institute (IRI) poll, based on 1,500 surveys conducted from February 19-27, shows more optimism about the future than was seen in September 2007 (reftel). More people said the country is going in the right direction than in September. Likewise, satisfaction with the development of democracy is up, and more people's economic situations improved over the previous two months. Petty corruption remains very low, and confidence in the patrol police remains high. Trust in the courts is still low at 27 percent, although this is five points higher than September. When people are asked what should be the priority of the government, both regaining the separatist regions and creating jobs top the list. The ruling National Movement (UNM) is seen as the most capable political party in addressing people's problems. However, confidence in most political parties also rose. The poll indicates as many as five political parties could have enough support to be elected to Parliament in the May election. Russia remains the main threat in people's eyes, and the loss of the separatist regions and war are the biggest fears. 92 percent of Georgians would not trade Abkhazia for NATO membership. Electricity and roads are still seen as the government's biggest achievements, though roads and water follow unemployment as the biggest challenges in the regions. IRI said the poll indicates that approximately 50-60 percent of the population currently supports the current government regarding the coming parliamentary election. It also indicated that businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili is the most popular public figure, closely followed by President Saakashvili and multiple opposition leaders. Overall, the results are a welcome sign following the turbulent political scene of the past six months. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The International Republican Institute (IRI), in conjunction with The Gallup Organization, conducted a USAID-funded poll across Georgia from February 19-27, 2008. 1500 adults (age 18) were randomly interviewed, and the poll contains a margin of error of three percent or less.

Optimism Increases

¶3. (SBU) The poll shows more optimism (73 percent) about the future than was seen in the September 2007 poll results (59 percent) -- close to the levels of February 2007. 41 percent said the country is going in the right direction (compared to 36 percent last fall and 48 percent in February 2007). Likewise, 45 percent of people are satisfied with the way democracy is developing in the country (versus 38 percent in September). 24 percent of people said the economic situation

improved over the past two months (compared to 18 percent in September). 48 percent reported that their households' financial situation stayed the same over the last two months. 11 percent said it improved (versus 8 percent in September).

Rule of Law Holds Steady

¶4. (SBU) People reported that petty corruption remains very low. 95 percent said they had not paid a bribe for any service in the previous six months. Confidence in the patrol police remains high as well (at 77 percent). Confidence in the courts saw a five percent increase versus September, although it is still low at 27 percent.

It's Still the Economy,
and the Separatist Regions

¶5. (SBU) Unemployment and economic conditions are still seen as the most important issues facing the country, just ahead of maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity. Despite this, when people are asked what should be the first priority of the government, regaining the separatist regions edges out creating jobs by one percentage point. However, 93 percent of Georgians believe the separatist regions must be restored through peaceful means.

UNM Stays Strong, Opposition Also Stronger

TBILISI 00000437 002 OF 002

¶6. (SBU) 72 percent of respondents said they had a medium to high interest in politics, the highest level in four years. The ruling National Movement (UNM) is seen as the most capable political party in addressing most of the nation's problems. However, confidence in most political parties has risen as well. Five different political parties polled at or above the five percent threshold to gain seats in Parliament. Georgians still want a strong, forceful president, but one who is close to the people. 44 percent of respondents believe the May parliamentary elections will be free and fair.

Threats and Fears

¶7. (SBU) Russia remains Georgia's main threat in people's eyes. Losing the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and war are the biggest fears. 92 percent of Georgians would not trade Abkhazia for NATO membership, and 53 percent said Georgia should leave the CIS. Georgians still consider the USA one of their country's best friends and strongest supporters, after Ukraine.

Successes and Failures

¶8. (SBU) Electricity and roads remain the government's biggest achievements. However, roads and water follow unemployment as the biggest challenges facing the government in rural areas. The government crackdown on November 7, 2007 was widely seen as the government's biggest failure, followed by inflation and unemployment. Tbilisi Mayor Ugulava's major failures are seen as violations of private property rights and not reflecting public opinion with his decisions.

Political Leader Ratings

¶9. (C) Businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili topped the list of public figures with favorable ratings (70 percent). Second was President Saakashvili (63) and then Tina Khidasheli, Levan Berdzenishvili, and Speaker Nino Burjanadze (each at 62 percent). David Gamkrelidze, Koba Davitashvili, and Levan Gachechiladze each had 60 percent favorable ratings. Following these were David Usupashvili (59), PM Lado Gurgenidze (58), Zviad Dzidziguri and Kakha Kukava (57 each), and Irakli Okruashvili (56 percent favorable). Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava (48), Salome Zourabichvili and Shalva Natelashvili (45 each), Goga Khaindrava (42), Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (40), and Zurab Tkemeladze (39 percent) came next. Many government officials did not fare so well. Favorable ratings for these persons were as follows: David Bakradze (37), PG Eka Tkeshelashvili (28), David Kezerashvili (23), Gia Nodia and Vano Merabishvili (22), and Eka Sharashenidze (16).

Elections Implications

¶10. (C) IRI Acting Chief of Party, Dima Shashkin, said the poll indicated that approximately 50-60 percent of the population supports the current government regarding the coming parliamentary election. Conversely, it also indicated that 30-35 percent of the population does not like Saakashvili.

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